

TEACHER NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

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DO TEACHERS need to become cognizant of the consequences of their nonverbal messages in teacher-pupil interaction? Can teachers alter and modify the attitudes and meanings that they communicate nonverbally to pupils? Are we overlooking and minimizing the significance of nonverbal cues in our analysis of classroom interaction?

In a study of teacher nonverbal behavior at the elementary school level, teachers differed in their ability and inclination to be encouraging or inhibiting in their communicative contacts with pupils. The evidence suggested that the teachers who were most encouraging tended to reveal their interest in pupils through their listening behavior, their appropriate responsiveness, and their emotional support. Teachers who displayed inhibiting communicative behaviors were disinterested in pupil talk, were inconsistent in their behavioral responses to pupils, and were more likely to express disapproval in their nonverbal contacts with pupils.¹

Classroom Interaction

For the past several years an assumption supporting many studies in education has been that the pattern of communication existing in a classroom represents a major datum for research activity. Investigators have centered on the direction and amount of verbal communication occurring in the classroom between the teacher and pupils with supposedly little attention devoted to nonverbal communication. To be sure, major reasons for such a lack of concern with the nonverbal can be traced to the difficulties of categorization, the elusiveness of the meaning of nonverbal messages, and the seemingly subordinate function the nonverbal plays to the verbal in classroom settings.

¹Charles M. Galloway. "An Exploratory Study of Observational Procedures for Determining Teacher Nonverbal Communication." University of Florida, Gainesville, 1962. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation.)

Indeed, observational procedures that provide faultless descriptions of verbal interaction have not been fully developed and such research needs to continue. For these reasons and perhaps more, the nonverbal dimension has been minimized, underplayed, and sometimes overlooked in teacher-pupil research.

During ordinary classroom talk between a teacher and pupils it may appear that an exchange of information is occurring exclusively at the verbal level, but a freightage of meanings is interchanged at the nonverbal level also. There are an indefinite number of signs and signals that serve the purpose of what we may term nonverbal language. Such a conclusion can be stated because pupils are reading the meaning of the expressions and conduct of a teacher whether the teacher likes it or not. Sometimes the glance of an eye or a facial expression may reveal what the meaning is—indeed, a message communicated in this way may be quite informative.

In everyday classroom interaction the communicative aspects of meaning between the teacher and pupils are fraught with elusiveness and complexity. Verbal language assumes the tremendous burden for the coherency of communication between human beings. And verbal language serves us well for it has an infinite flexibility in expressing thought forms and concepts. Indeed, it is almost too obvious to state that teachers rely overwhelmingly upon words to state and clarify the ideas and meanings they intend to transmit. After all an exchange of information and ideas between the teacher and pupils must be transmitted somehow and verbal vehicles represent the primary means of conveyance.



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One of the negligent acts man has perpetrated, however, is the assignment of the same definition and meaning to more than one word, and conversely, the assignment of multiple definitions and meanings to the same word. There are other variables that add to the difficulty: the intention of the speaker, the perceptual experience of the listener, the context, and the present feelings and attitudes of the persons at the instant of communication. Even if distortions were consciously avoided in communication, the problems these variables present would be enough to account for serious misunderstandings between teachers and pupils.

Words and Meaning

Words are "slippery customers" when it comes to meaning and the problem of unintentional discrepancies in the use of words while communicating is serious enough to account for profound misunderstandings. Torrance² has found that even though teachers vocalize the "right words," purportedly representing certain attitudes, the teacher's "real attitude" was likely to "show through," thereby affecting behavior and emotional reactions on the part of pupils.

To check on the fidelity of verbal statements, pupils read the meanings behind nonverbal expressions and quite frequently place greater store in the validity of the character of the nonverbal. Indeed, among many pupils the nonverbal is heavily relied upon to reveal the authenticity, truth and genuineness of a message

²E. Paul Torrance. "Teacher Attitude and Pupil Perception." *Journal of Teacher Education* 11:97-102; March 1960.

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communicated by a teacher. For example, a teacher may verbally utter an approval of some seatwork a pupil is doing, yet the pupil may pick up cues which suggest disapproval. Although a teacher may verbally insist with the most persuasive language that he holds a certain belief, a pupil will continually check the teacher's nonverbal expressions to see if a contradiction can be detected.

Throughout the course of a teaching day a teacher may believe that he is communicating, "I enjoy this subject," "Aren't these ideas interesting?" "I like you," when all the time the pupils in the classroom are understanding different meanings. That is, a contradiction exists between what the teacher says and what the teacher communicates. In effect pupils will gauge the true intent or meaning of a teacher's communication by attending to the ungovernable aspects of his expressive behavior as a check on the verbal. If a difference exists between the two expressions, it is the nonverbal that is believed and accepted by the pupil as representing the authentic message.

Indeed, the pupil is in a position to be the most seriously victimized by difficulties in communication since the educative process is highly verbalized with a great premium placed on the printed and spoken word. Overlooked by many of us in our classroom teaching is that pupils may learn more true meanings from nonverbal messages than they do from our verbalizations. For indeed, it is the nonverbal that we turn to for meaning when the verbal appears to be vague and confusing.

The Disadvantaged

Especially important is the notion that nonverbal messages may be more significant to pupils than teacher verbalizations when they attempt to ascertain the teacher's true feelings and attitudes toward them. A prominent example of this phenomenon occurs with linguistically disadvantaged youngsters who are bombarded by the verbal avalanches of teacher talk in classroom settings, and who subsequently have no recourse but to rely upon the nonverbal messages of teacher behavior. The research conducted by Bernstein³ has shown that youngsters from the lower classes depend almost exclusively upon the nonverbal for the detection of meaning in school situations. These children do not possess the verbal facility to compete in an academically oriented classroom of abstract symbolization, and they most assuredly do not understand the verbal language of culturally different teachers.

While the communication process proceeds continuously and simultaneously in all pupils when the teacher is talking, each child attempts to understand the teacher's words, gesture, intonation, action, and silence according to the meaning such signs and signals have for them individually. But, it is the culturally disadvantaged child who understands the *least* amount of information that is transmitted verbally and who reads the *most* meaning into the nonverbal behavior of

³ Basil Bernstein, "Social Structure, Language, and Learning," *Educational Research* 3:163-76; June 1961.

the teacher. In all fairness, however, many of these youngsters not only read meanings that are not intended by the teacher, but they also misread the true intentions of the teacher. Such an outcome is the consequence of two language worlds and especially of two worlds of reality.

Nonverbal Meanings

In conclusion, it must be stated that the meanings inherent in nonverbal expressions are used by pupils to check on the fidelity of communicative acts, and that such meanings are used by these same pupils to obtain a better picture of the self a teacher proposes to be. By interpreting and inferring from nonverbal expressions pupils may attempt to obtain the full import of a teacher's perceptions and motivations. To gain perceptual clarity and consistency each pupil feels he must be aware of the various nonverbal cues which facilitate obtaining added information. During classroom interaction, the expressive acts of a teacher's activity suggest a promissory character that is assumed by pupils to represent a more accurate reflection of the real self of the teacher.

Within classroom settings it is now recognized that teachers vary considerably in their ability, or in their willingness to communicate effectively when the question of competence in verbal language is raised. Teachers vary widely also in their disposition to communicate favorable feelings and attitudes toward pupils. The travesty is that too many of us are not aware of the feelings which we express toward students in our teaching. More pointedly, it might be stated that teachers are unaware of the consequences of the nonverbal messages they transmit in classroom teaching, not to mention the out-of-classroom interactions. Perhaps a failure to interpret or to be aware of the many "affective" implications of nonverbal language constantly remains a grave handicap and a profound difficulty for truly understanding the impact of one's communication with pupils.

This discussion has attempted to highlight the function nonverbal messages play in classroom interaction between teachers and pupils. Research investigations of the nonverbal dimension are extremely difficult, but the significance of the nonverbal is unquestioned. ☞

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